
NATIONAL READING RESEARCH CENTER

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How children's motivations relate to literacy development and instruction

Helping students become engaged in long-term literacy activity is a challenge for teachers at every grade level. Teachers and researchers agree that motivation is central to literacy development, yet few have asked what we mean by literacy motivation. In this column we look at the spectrum of motivations that children bring into the classroom and discuss how these motivations connect to instruction.

We have asked many children, "Why are you reading this text?" Children's reasons and goals for reading are their literacy motivations. We have used focus groups, clinical interviews, and self-report questionnaires to illuminate the depth and stability of children's motivations for reading and writing. In these different inquiries, children have expressed eight distinct motivations for literacy. A typical child possesses several motivations, but not all are equally powerful. Students in third to fifth grades reported their reasons for reading in the following ways:

- One student noted, "I like reading mysteries because it is fun to get lost in the book," showing *involvement* as a goal for reading.

- Many children report reading about favorite topics. For example, "I like to find out more about cheetahs because they are really amazing," expresses the motivation of *curiosity*. This student's interest in cheetahs propels her to learn

about the world around her through reading informational books.

- Some students are attracted by *challenge*. They like figuring out a complex plot or integrating a lot of facts about a topic, such as spiders.

- Children frequently report *social interaction* as motivation for literacy. When students share a book with friends, gain a partner in collaborative writing, become a member of a book club, maintain a friend through sharing books, or exchange interests, they are socially motivated.

- Besides reading for their own interest, children often report reading "because the teacher said to." We characterize this as a *compliance* motivation. These students are interacting with a text in order to meet the teacher's expectation or to conform to a classroom requirement.

- One student reported that she reads or writes "to get as many points as I can." Her motivational goal is *recognition*, the desire to feel publicly acknowledged.

- A frequent goal reported by students is *competition*. These students strive to be the best at literacy tasks, want to demonstrate superiority, and work hard to achieve high grades.

- Last, but not least, students confess *work avoidance* as a goal for some reading and writing. For example one

student said, "I am writing this story so I won't have to read my book."

These brief examples illustrate our general finding that children's motivations for literacy are multidimensional and diverse. Children are not merely motivated or unmotivated, but they possess a profile of different types of motivational goals. Just as students bring a diversity of background experiences and knowledge to the classroom, they also bring a variety of motivational orientations. Recognizing the different characteristics of these motivations is the first step toward understanding how to foster the growth of long-term literacy participation.

Intrinsic motivations sustain long-term literacy learning

We distinguish between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. As described by Deci and his colleagues (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991), intrinsic motivations are goals that are internal to the learner. Intrinsic motivations spring from personal interests and private experiences that develop into reasons for reading. These reasons include: involvement, curiosity, social interaction, and challenge. One of our students reported that he reads for involvement:

Last week I was getting into a book I was reading 'cause I was almost done. I

carried the book with me in my hand going to meet a friend. I was reading and it was a straight street, so I just went up the street reading the book.

In contrast, extrinsic motivations originate with the teacher or the parent. For example, students who read to receive points or gold stars are motivated by the incentive provided by the teacher. Compliance, recognition, and getting good grades are examples of frequently stated goals that operate as extrinsic motivations for reading and writing.

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations influence the learner in very different ways. Intrinsic motivations appear to be imperative to lifelong, voluntary reading. Students who read frequently and widely are pursuing personal, internalized goals (Wigfield, in press). Strategies such as finding books, maintaining a place for reading, preserving large amounts of time for reading activities, and coping with distractions are learned and sustained by intrinsic motivations.

Strong internal purposes for reading are needed to persevere in learning complex strategies such as summarizing, self-monitoring, and drawing inferences during reading. Because intrinsic motivations last longer and support sustained thinking, they are vital to higher order strategy development (Pintrich & Schrauben, 1992). Extrinsic motivations lead to shallow processing. If students can finish assignments (fulfill a compliance motivation) by using low-level strategies rather than more difficult ones, they will tend to use the least effort. Extrinsic motivations lead to "least effort" literacy styles, whereas intrinsic motivations are more likely to inspire long-term literacy commitments.

Extrinsic motivation controls behavior temporarily

Extrinsic motivations that students have reported to us include compliance, recognition, competition, and work-avoidance. These goals for reading and writing are powerful because they induce immediate effort and attention, but they are also short-term. For example, winning students that they will win points and/or lose privileges will command at-

tention and effort toward a literacy task such as answering comprehension questions, but only temporarily, because the literacy activity terminates when the goal is attained. If they are reading to complete an assignment, the reading stops when the compliance motivation is fulfilled. Extrinsic motivations do not regenerate themselves. The teacher must provide a new goal to induce new reading activities. One of our students, Kerrin, described to the interviewer how her reading complies with the classroom routine.

I: Did you finish the *Wonderful Flight to the Mushroom Planet* yet?

K: No, we got a few pages yet.

I: Do you think that you will read the whole book?

K: Yeah, she says to finish them.

I: Do you like science fiction books?

K: Uh huh.

I: How do you know when to read?

K: The teacher tells us.

I: Have you finished the book report?

K: The teacher hasn't decided.

Cameron and Pierce (1994) examined more than 150 studies about the effect of extrinsic rewards on intrinsic motivation. They concluded that when students are rewarded for completing tasks, irrespective of success (like winning a prize for finishing a book), intrinsic motivations decrease. Both time engaged in the task and attitude toward the activity (such as reading) decreased. Similarly, McLoyd (1979) found that students who had been rewarded for reading high-interest books subsequently read less in a free time period than children who had also read high-interest books but had not been rewarded. The reward increased the reading time for students with low-interest books. McLoyd (1979) reasoned that children who were not rewarded for reading high-interest books attributed the cause of their reading to positive, internal factors (e.g., interest, curiosity). Their counterparts, who were rewarded, attributed their reading behavior to external factors, so the reading behavior diminished when the external reward was removed.

The distinction between intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation, we believe, is pivotal for teachers.

Motivations appear to work in different ways. Intrinsic motivations enhance long-term strategy development and time spent in literacy activities. Extrinsic ones have a positive short-term effect on controlling behavior and attention to uninteresting tasks but have a negative long-term effect on building literacy lifestyles.

Intrinsic motivations are needed in integrated instruction

Teachers who want to develop intrinsic motivations may construct integrated instruction that unifies reading, writing, science, and social studies (see Guthrie, McCann, Hynd, & Stahl, in press). Successful integrated instruction is based on learners' curiosities and aesthetic involvements and permits students to connect ideas across many types of texts. Integrated instruction requires self-directed learning. Students identify their own interests, choose appropriate books, and extend their literacy in ways that fulfill their own individual visions. An emphasis on intrinsic motivations leads to collaborative activity, because social motivations are prominent among elementary and middle school learners. Direct instruction in skills and strategies is not neglected, but it is situated in ways that serve content learning.

Teachers who integrate instruction confirm the role of intrinsic motivation (Sweet & Guthrie, in press). They describe highly motivated learners as intrinsically involved, engrossed in learning, and sharply focused on lesson content. They expect these students to use higher order strategies, to interact socially with peers, and to persist in the face of obstacles. In contrast, students who were less intrinsically motivated were expected not to exhibit these behaviors. Integrated instruction cannot easily be built on extrinsic motivational schemes. A system of points and external rewards will not sustain the long-term, self-directed, collaborative learning that is required in highly integrated instruction.

Extrinsic motivations are needed for skill-building

When instruction is organized around skills related to reading, writing, and

spelling, ample practice is needed. Because skill-based teachers need to set goals for excellent performance and to cover an important set of objectives, an emphasis on performance incentives is compatible with well-organized, sequential language arts teaching that emphasizes basic skills.

Sequentially organized language arts teaching may not be compatible with an emphasis on intrinsic motivations. Motivations such as curiosity and involvement may lead students to choose topics and books that are inconsistent with the prescribed sequence. The preset instructional organization may be disturbed when intrinsic goals are incorporated into the mainstream of a skill-centered curriculum.

Teachers should align their motivational climate with their instruction

For centuries, teachers have been providing instruction without analyzing children's motivations for reading. Many teachers have inspired lifelong

literacy without reflecting on the learners' motivations or on their own beliefs about motivations. However, we cannot afford to ignore the growing knowledge base in literacy motivation. Far too many students fail to acquire basic competencies and choose not to utilize the literacy competence they possess.

There are places for both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations in every classroom. At times when skill building and behavior control are necessary, extrinsic incentives are useful. When higher order literacy and self-directed learning are desired, the importance of students' intrinsic motivation should increase. By aligning their motivational support system with their instructional practices, teachers can enhance the development of long-term literacy engagement.

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